Seafood Basics: Pan-Searing (Fish, Scallops, and Shrimp)

Quick · Serves 4

Ken's note: TBD

The master page for pan-seared seafood. The rules are the same for everything: dry the seafood, use a hot pan, don't crowd it, and don't walk away. It cooks fast.

Ingredients

Prep (all)

- Neutral oil, for the pan
- Butter (1–2 Tbsp), for finishing
- Kosher salt and black pepper
- Lemon wedges

Scallops and shrimp

- 1½ lb large sea scallops (side muscle removed) or large shrimp (peeled and deveined)
- Hot pan: heat a heavy skillet (cast iron or stainless) over medium-high to high until the oil shimmers and just starts to smoke.
- Place them clockwise: lay each piece in the pan in order around the pan, starting at 12 o'clock and going clockwise, so you know which went in first.
- About 90 seconds per side. Don't move them while they sear. Flip them in the same clockwise order they went in.
- Move fast. Have everything ready, and work in batches so you don't crowd the pan.
- Pull them from the pan right away onto a plate, since they keep cooking from residual heat. Finish with lemon and a pinch of salt.

Method

1. Pat the seafood completely dry with paper towels. Wet seafood steams instead of searing. Season just before cooking.

Fish fillets (skin-on, 5–6 oz each)

1. Heat a nonstick or well-seasoned stainless pan over medium-high with 2 Tbsp oil until it shimmers. Lay in the fillets skin-side down and press each flat with a spatula for 10–15 seconds so the skin doesn't curl. Cook without moving 4–5 minutes, until the skin is deeply golden and the fish is opaque most of the way up. Add 2 Tbsp butter, tilt the pan, and spoon the foaming butter over the fish for 1–2 minutes until just cooked through. Rest 1–2 minutes. For skinless fillets, cook 3–4 minutes per side. Salmon is done at 120–130°F; white fish at 135–140°F.
2. The other seafood basics pages: Grilling; Bake, Roast, and Broil.

Notes

- **Shrimp:** flip them when they start to curl. Take them off the heat when they look like a C, not a circle (an O means overcooked and rubbery).
- **Scallops:** a deep golden crust on each flat side, with a just-opaque center. Add a little butter in the last 30 seconds if you like.

Finishing menu

- **Pan sauce:** after the fish comes out, add a minced shallot, a splash of white wine, and a spoonful of butter; reduce and add lemon (capers are a good addition).
- **Sauces** (all in Sauces): Lemon Butter Sauce, Beurre Blanc, Hollandaise, Lemon-Dijon Cream Sauce, or Tartar Sauce.
- **Garlic and chili:** see Garlic-Chili Shrimp.
- **Over:** pasta, risotto (see Risotto), rice, or a simple salad.